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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MLS

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TAGS: PGOV SOCI VM

SUBJECT: BANNED BOOKS REAPPEARING ON THE SHELVES

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Classified By: Pol/C Marc Knapper per 1.4 (b/d)

Summary

¶1. (C) The GVN recently allowed the publication of two previously banned books, and intellectuals credit the Government's "more progressive thinking" for the change. Coming on the heels of a museum exhibition last year that was highly critical of the GVN's past economic policies, the publication of these books represents an encouraging warming trend of the intellectual climate here. The GVN -- bolstered by economic and other successes at home and abroad -- may be increasingly willing to allow the public to choose for itself when it comes to previously controversial (but, for the most part, dead) issues, such as post-1975 economic policies. That said, more "controversial" political and human rights-related tomes will likely remain off the shelves for some time to come. End Summary.

Controversial Book Republished After 30 Years

¶2. (SBU) Local literary and intellectual circles are reacting favorably to the GVN's recent decision to allow the first publication in 30 years of the controversial "The History of the Vietnam Civil War (1771-1802)." The book first appeared in pre-1975 Saigon and was banned soon after the fall of the south because of the "cultural poisons" contained within. (Note: Discussing the merits of the Tay Son uprising (farmers, symbolizing North Vietnam) against the Nguyen dynasty (royalty, South Vietnam) was a political litmus test, which this book failed in the post-1975 environment. End Note.) The book's author, Vietnamese-American Ta Chi Dai Truong, spent a number of years in a re-education camp because of it.

¶3. (C) The publication of "The History of the Civil War in Vietnam (1771-1802)" was preceded last year by that of another controversial book, an autobiographical novel entitled "Three Other People." The author, To Hoai, is a well-known local writer who was once an agrarian reform field officer. Lai Nguyen An, a literary critic with the Vietnam Writers Association, told us that "Three Other People" had been banned because its "tell all" contents about the post-1975 agrarian reform program went counter to the GVN's position on the matter. The works by Ta Chi Dai Truong and To Hoai had attempted to "speak the truth," and their authors suffered for it, An said.

GVN's More Progressive Thinking an "Undeniable Trend

¶4. (C) Literary critic An credits the efforts of Vietnam's

intellectual community for the successful publishing of these and other formerly controversial works. However, the GVN's more forward and progressive thinking on previously taboo issues has also been critical, he continued. The publication of these works illustrates the GVN's growing tendency to look beyond the past and be more liberal in thinking about the sensitive issues of the old days. In the meantime, Vietnamese intellectuals now enjoy more freedom, An observed.

That said, some in the GVN continue to voice concerns about liberalizing the criteria for writing and publishing books, especially autobiographical novels. Nonetheless, this period represents a necessary transition in GVN thinking, An stated.

Comment

15. (C) Coming on the heels of a museum exhibition last year that was highly critical of the GVN's past economic policies (reftel), the publication of books such as "The History of the Civil War in Vietnam" or "Three Other People" represents an encouraging warming trend of the intellectual climate here. The GVN -- bolstered by economic and other successes at home and abroad -- may be increasingly willing to allow the public to choose for itself when it comes to previously controversial (but, for the most part, dead) issues such as post-1975 economic policies and the civil war of the late 18th century. That said, more "controversial" political and human rights-related tomes will likely remain off the shelves for some time to come. End Comment.

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